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CAPITOL SPOTLIGHT
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THE CRISIS IN EDUCATION

During the past few months, a number of independent prestigious commissions have issued reports on American education. The reports have been uniformly critical. While there has been some disagreement as to just what is wrong, all the observers have agreed that the quality of public education is poor and becoming worse.

As a congressman, I have always felt that the federal government should continue to play a major role in education. Local governments simply do not have the tax base, the public support, or in most cases, the vision to cope with the crisis in education.

It should be clear to everyone that unsatisfactory education has immediate and disastrous consequences in two key areas: the economy and national security. It is becoming ever harder for people with limited academic skills to obtain employment. Similarly, national security depends far more on "brain power" than on sheer numbers. Certainly, the quest for peace requires large numbers of dedicated individuals of great intellectual ability and advanced technical training in such diverse fields as nuclear physics, linguistics, and comparative politics.

Though the problem is complex, I feel we ought to start by building public support around the following key points:

1. Education is expensive. Budget cutting that starts with education inevitably results in a decline in the quality of our schools.

2. The heart of our educational system is teachers. Quality education cannot be built around the whims of students or the endless structuring and restructuring of bureaucrats. Teachers must be accorded the dignity, job security, and financial rewards to match the enormous demands we place on them. (As I write, teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District are about to strike to win rights and benefits that were gained by unionized industrial workers in the 1930s!)

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3. Our schools must maintain a rigid sense of priorities. I believe the basics of language skills, mathematics, and science must come first. The emphasis on reading, writing, and arithmetic has become a cliché simply because it reflects such irrefutable verities.

4. Our students need a broad education. Emphasis on fundamentals should not result in denigrating the social sciences and humanities. Anthropology, economics, literature, and music are essential elements in a basic curriculum. It saddens me to hear people compare drama or poetry to such "frills" as classes in "modern apartment living."

American education must always reflect the democratic values of our society. We ought never to seek to replicate educational systems that classify a child at seven or eight years of age, and allow his earliest school work to determine his entire life. Neither ought we build a technocratic society in which all education not directly relevant to specific economic functions is deemed superfluous.

Contrary to one of the favorite aphorisms of a former California governor, in education less is not more. We need more hours in the school day--especially at the high school level. We need more days in the school year. We need vastly improved summer school programs for those who wish to devote most of their summer time to academic pursuits. We need a national mood of greater respect for intellectual achievement. Most of all, we need a nation of taxpayers willing to provide the necessary funding for the kind of quality education to which so many give mere lip service.

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